

## **Performing *Land of Smiles*: Dramatization as Research in Thailand’s Antitrafficking Movement**

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This article presents a study of how the writing, composing, and production of the feminist musical *Land of Smiles* productively exposed and troubled the normative discourses of Thailand’s antitrafficking movement. Engaging three sets of focus group participants—Western nongovernmental organization employees, female migrants from Burma, and Western and Thai artistic production staff members—I sought to understand how discourses around victimhood, rescue, and morality were transformed following a production of the musical in Chiang Mai, Thailand. I argue that the musical performance served as a site of intervention in these discourses, allowing participants to critically evaluate the roles they play in the antitrafficking movement. This intervention represents a new approach to feminist international research, which I call “dramatization as research.”

*Keywords: performance, Thailand, trafficking, feminist international research*

The antitrafficking movement in the developing world has been the subject of numerous important scholarly feminist critiques. Whereas neoabolitionist feminists promote the idea that sex work and sex trafficking are conceptually linked and, thus, suggest that antitrafficking nongovernmental

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organizations (NGOs) should focus their efforts on “rescuing” women from prostitution (see Barry, 1995; Jeffries, 1997; MacKinnon, 2007), prights feminists argue that sex work and sex trafficking are mutually exclusive categories (see Bindman & Doezema, 1997; Bumiller, 1998; Cheng, 2011; Doezema, 2000, 2010; Kempadoo, Sanghera, & Pattanaik, 2005; O’Connell Davidson, 1998; Parreñas, 2011; Shaeffer-Grabel, 2011) and, therefore, view the efforts of those seeking to rescue sex workers as conceptually misguided. Instead, prights feminists call for implementing improved working conditions for sex workers, which they believe could alleviate the dangers associated with this work. The debate between these feminist camps has become the subject of what is now a highly polarized, politically charged discourse on human trafficking.

Led to a large extent by the U.S. government, the antitrafficking “rescue industry” (Agustin, 2007) relies on what Bernstein (2012) has called “carceral feminism” for its maintenance, that is, legalistic, “crime and punishment” responses to issues affecting women, rather than an approach that places women’s own experiences and, indeed, their human rights at the center of the conversation (Chuang, 2006; Segrave, Pickering, & Milivojevic, 2009). In addition, this movement creates and reinforces gendered relationships between Western feminists and their “third-world” counterparts (i.e., women in development contexts who Western feminists seek to assist). These relationships, as postcolonial scholar Mohanty (1991, 2002) discussed in her writing on the “third-world difference,” are often skewed in such a way as to privilege the perspectives, voices, and politics of the Western (read: White, middle class, educated) feminist, while rendering the voices of the third-world “other” invisible (see Alcoff, 1991–1992; Mohanty, 1991, 2002, Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). These gendered relationships create discursive spaces that lock women into binary categories of victim and savior (Doezema, 2000), thereby “flattening” the experiences of women in development contexts (Parreñas, 2011), while reifying the role of the privileged Western feminist.

Responding to this complexity, my article takes as its starting point the wealth of scholarship that has informed the current understanding of the antitrafficking movement, that is, scholarship that critiques the neoabolitionist tropes and moralisms enacted by many of the movements’ members. I take as my premise the idea that the antitrafficking movement relies on performances of intimacy—demonstrations of care and emotional connection to the supposed “beneficiaries” (often called “victims” or “survivors”) who are the objects of rescue—to maintain its status quo. I attempt to push this argument further by asking whether and how such performances of intimacy can be challenged by a theatrical production of a musical designed specifically to expose the problems with the normative victim–savior relationship that characterizes the antitrafficking movement.

Engaging three sets of participants—Western NGO employees, female migrants from ethnic communities in Burma, and Western and Thai artistic production members—I sought to understand how a musical and, more broadly, the theatrical medium itself can expose the roles played by various actors in institutional life and the performances of intimacy that accompany these roles. I sought to understand how narratives about victimization, saviorhood, morality, and discovery can be exposed by a theatrical performance, and how theater can be used to trouble the “spectacle” of human rights witnessing itself. I also engaged my own positionality as researcher-artist in the dramatization process, asking how my experiences and location contributed to the emerging narrative of the musical.

I argue that the production of *Land of Smiles* created a “space” for stakeholder participants to reflect on their roles in the antitrafficking movement and temporarily disengage from the binary categorizations that antitrafficking discourse tends to cement. The focus groups that followed the performances allowed NGO employees, female migrants, and theater artists to step out of their roles, if only for an afternoon, and engage complexity, rather than regurgitate the tropes that typically characterize antitrafficking discourse. In so doing, these actors became more aware of the roles they play in the movement, and began to critically evaluate those roles in new and productive ways.

### **About *Land of Smiles***

*Land of Smiles* is a two-act, 15-song musical that I wrote and composed about the trafficking of women in Thailand. Inspired by interviews with female migrant laborers from ethnic communities in Burma, antitrafficking NGO employees, and Western policy makers, the musical dramatizes what I call the “dominant trafficking narrative”: a story told by Western antitrafficking advocates that reinforces Western moralisms about intimacy, rights, and women’s proper roles, as well as notions of individualism and a modernization framework that underscores development thinking. Drawing on my 20-year career as a professional playwright and composer, I analyzed this narrative and created a dramatic piece designed to expose the flaws of the narrative’s construction. I then staged a production of the musical in Thailand for members of the community who participated in my original interviews.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, I sought to raise awareness among stakeholders about the practices that characterize this environment, and suggest that women “on the ground” who are affected by trafficking issues are well positioned to illuminate problems and find solutions.

The story focuses on the aftermath of a brothel raid in northern Thailand. Lipoh, a young Kachin (ethnic minority)<sup>3</sup> migrant from Burma, seems to be underage, making her an automatic trafficking victim in the eyes of the law. Emma Gable, a young American human rights attorney from Indiana, is sent to prepare Lipoh to be a witness in a trial to prosecute her trafficker. Emma must convince Lipoh to be the person everyone sees: a trafficking victim. But Lipoh is unwilling to cooperate. She insists that she is 18 years old and was working in the brothel willingly. Not only that, she wants to go back.

What transpires is a journey into Thailand’s antitrafficking movement—a world burdened with politics, morality, and the rhetoric of human rights. Through hearing Lipoh’s story, Emma discovers that human rights violations—including the burning of villages, torture, forced conscription of child soldiers, portering, and the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war—are being committed against the Kachin people of Burma at the Burmese government’s behest (see Roberts, 2012). But these atrocities are

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to being audience members, some of the original stakeholders who I interviewed participated in the production as translators and production assistants. Others served as dramaturgs, clarifying details about migrants’ experience that informed the script’s development.

<sup>3</sup> Kachin State is an ethnic region in northern Burma that has long been in conflict with the central Burmese government. Ongoing warfare has caused citizens to migrate to neighboring countries such as Thailand in search of work, making them highly vulnerable to trafficking.

overshadowed by a narrative about trafficking that serves the needs of the antitrafficking movement rather than the women it is trying to help.

In writing *Land of Smiles*, I sought to problematize the discourse on trafficking that circulates among feminist scholars studying this antitrafficking "space." I wanted to unpack the Western "spectator gaze" (Hesford, 2011) that sees female migrant sex workers as trafficking victims, the predominant "subjects" of the well-meaning West. I wanted to turn this trope around by shedding light on the lens through which Western actors often see the issue of trafficking and, in so doing, expose that the trafficking of women in Thailand is not an isolated human rights abuse that takes place in a separate sphere from Western behavior, structures, and logics. Rather, I suggest, members of the West are in fact complicit in this human rights drama and its objectification of third-world victims. In explicating this, I sought to re-enforce liberation psychology's notion of "collective trauma," the idea that all members of a community are caught in social catastrophe, and that the inability to see the interconnections between seemingly divergent groups of people can, in fact, perpetuate further human rights abuses (see Caruth, 1996; Hesford, 2011; Martin-Baro, 1994; Santner, 2001; Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

The goal of the project was to engage a new method of researching and responding to the complex, contested space of the antitrafficking movement. I call this method "dramatization as research," or DAR.

### **Method**

During the preliminary data collection phase in 2011 (Phase 1), I conducted 54 interviews with antitrafficking NGO employees; female migrant sex workers, factory laborers, and domestic laborers; community activists; Thai immigration officers; and U.S. government and United Nations employees. Interviews took place in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Poi Pot, and Samut Sakhon, Thailand.

During the creative phase in 2012 (Phase 2), I drew on the interview data to conceptualize, write, and produce two staged readings of *Land of Smiles* in Los Angeles. I relied on the dramaturgical guidance of artistic colleagues in Los Angeles, as well as members of the Kachin Women's Association of Thailand, a community-based organization in the Northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, whose members had participated in my original interviews.

The production phase (Phase 3) involved staging four performances of *Land of Smiles* in Chiang Mai in December 2013, with a cast of actors from Los Angeles and Thailand. The musical was produced in collaboration with a local theater group and was funded by a series of small grants from the University of Southern California. Migrants from Burma and antitrafficking NGO employees attended the performances, and postperformance focus groups of between 10 and 18 participants were conducted in English, Thai, and Burmese. Focus groups lasted approximately one hour and took place onsite at the theater location. Artistic production staff members including actors, designers, directors, and backstage staff also took part in the focus groups bringing the total number of participants to 118. Whereas the artists' real names were made public during the performance and are thus included in this text, for purposes of anonymity, the names of all migrants and NGO employees have been changed.

### **Framing Dramatization as Research**

Feminist scholars conducting international and intercultural research have critiqued the application of positivist methodologies to these contexts, arguing that such approaches rely on neocolonial tropes and incomplete frameworks for "knowing" (Alcoff, 1991–1992; Harding, 1998; Hegde, 2011; Mohanty, 2002; Tickner, 2001; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). One of the problems with a positivist approach is that it stems from liberal assumptions that homogenize the potentiality of the individual. Liberalism assumes that experience can be measured according to abstract assumptions that often "flatten" the lived realities of women in the developing world (Parreñas, 2011), while reifying the value systems of the enlightened West (Hesford, 2011).

Therefore, to responsibly advance the project of feminist international research, those of us working in such contexts are tasked with engaging alternative epistemological frameworks and becoming attentive to horizontal relationships between researcher and the "subjects" of our studies. As Haraway (1988) explained,

Feminists have stakes in a successor science project that offers a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions. (p. 579)

I suggest that dramatic storytelling can offer an alternative framework for projects that require such attention. Its emphasis on subjectivity, positionality, embodiment, and experience could advance feminist research methodologies, as this mode of engagement is also premised on the refusal of positivist abstraction. Such a refusal is important in international contexts because of dilemmas centered around the binary concept of self versus other and the problem of inequality between researcher and subject. Researchers from the West who wish to conduct their work ethically cannot "measure" the experience of the "other" effectively without also engaging reflexively in their own subject positions. As I will explicate below, Dramatization as Research (DAR) embraces the ethic of reflexivity.

To situate my discussion of DAR, I first turn to complementary research methodologies that inform my conception of this new method. Foremost among these are practice-based research (PBR) and participatory action research (PAR). PBR is a new method of inquiry within the academy (Barrett & Bolt, 2010; Graham, Wager, Beck, & Belliveau, 2011; Piccini, 2002; Rye, 2003). Originally conceptualized in the United Kingdom in the 1990s (Piccini, 2002), it relies on "tacit knowledge" (Barrett & Bolt, 2010), that is, knowledge gained through direct experience rather than distanced abstraction, and the inability to replicate results scientifically or predict an outcome (p. 2). PBR also relies on "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988), privileging perspectives that are "particular" and idiosyncratic, through which unrecognized social realities can be brought to the fore (p. 4).

PBR engages a "double articulation" between theory and practice, "whereby theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time that practice is informed by theory" (Bolt, 2010, p. 29). According to this logic, theater may inform a research agenda because theater, unlike other forms of communication,

relies on process rather than product. Actors and musicians perform live on stage rather than within a mediated representational context, thereby privileging the temporary over the fixed (Dolan, 2005). As Carter (2010) explained, "To understand the social value of what we are doing, we need to study the process of creativity, rather than its outcome" (p. 17).

PAR addresses similar concerns. PAR is a method of activist research that predicated knowledge formation on the basis of horizontalism between researcher and subject (Dura & Singhal, 2009; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Ledwith & Springett, 2010; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 1997; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). The philosophical tenets of PAR are to engage the researcher and subject in a dialogic relationship to enact a research agenda. Often, this method uses creative or artistic practices, with subjects and researchers working together to produce work dedicated to social justice concerns. Although arts-oriented PAR projects rely on the participation of the community in creating a dramatic work, these projects nevertheless still focus on the primary agenda of "giving voice to" the subjects of research without necessitating the same reflective stance on the part of the researchers involved (Boal, 1979; Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

I suggest that the DAR approach, in addition to engaging a range of participants akin to PAR and PBR projects, also requires the active participation of the researcher (in this case, the artist-researcher). In this approach, researcher-artists must bring their own subjective, embodied experiences to the work, thereby engaging in a stronger emotional, psychological, and political investment than they might in other types of research projects. In addition to bringing the perspectives of multiple audiences to the fore, in DAR, the researcher-artist's own subjective experience is interrogated in the process of unearthing the dramatic narrative. In this way, the goals of DAR are not entirely known until they are discovered through the creative process of uncovering and communicating the dramatic narrative.

As a wealth of scholarship interrogating research-based theater has demonstrated,<sup>4</sup> the theatrical medium lends itself well to emotional and social discoveries. As such, it serves as both a complement to and a method of social science research in itself. Dramatic narratives, as feminist performance studies scholar Jill Dolan (2005) discussed, can also make visible conditions that have become accepted frameworks in society and, in so doing, help audiences dismantle certain normative thoughts and ideas. Theater, as an embodied medium, serves to open up events, experiences, and processes to a particular kind of scrutiny by placing them in the "flexible time" of the liminal performance space (Turner, 1974). This space has "utopian" potential (Dolan, 2005) because it allows us to "experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that's always, itself, in process" (p. 13). To this, I add that theater has the potential to help us revisit seemingly fixed aspects of cultural identity, transforming them from static spaces into ones rich with multiplicities of meaning.

The goal of DAR, then, is not to rearticulate the act of flattening women's experiences, nor is it to impose visibility on female research subjects in ways that essentialize their experience. Rather, the goal is

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<sup>4</sup> Space limitations prevent a rich discussion of documentary theater, theater of the oppressed, verbatim theater, and other modes of inquiry that unite creative practice and research. Each is, in its own way, related to and distinct from my conception of DAR. For a detailed discussion, see Kamler (2015).

to unearth the complexities related to the visibility of the subject—in this case, a female migrant sex worker—through making the research process itself visible and through interrogating the theatrical practice of creative representation. In other words, the onus in this method is not on the subject to become visible, but on the researcher-practitioner to reflexively represent the experiences of the subject vis-à-vis the artistic project, and for participants from an array of social locations to engage with this experience as audience members. Performativity thus becomes encapsulated in the drama of the research project itself. Actors creatively represent the dramatized experiences of research subjects, relieving the actual subjects from being inscribed upon or at the mercy of a dominant Western gaze.

Drawing on this conceptual framework, I sought to understand how the production of *Land of Smiles* in Chiang Mai could serve as a site for dismantling the normative discourses that characterize the antitrafficking movement. My questions engaged several aspects of the dramatization process: In creating the piece, could I, as a researcher-artist, self-reflexively trouble the self-other binary that is so commonly reinforced in international feminist research? How would my work with the communities who inspired the writing of the musical inform my dramatic choices? In the focus groups that followed the performances, could NGO employees, female migrants, and members of the artistic production staff unpack their own “performances” in the social world vis-à-vis their witnessing the performances onstage? Could they begin to disentangle the cultural meanings they commonly project onto victims and saviors? And could the project as a whole trouble the rigid narratives that typically characterize the antitrafficking movement?

### **Performing *Land of Smiles***

#### ***Troubling the Victim Narrative***

My original field interviews revealed that many women’s experiences of sex work did not match with the sensationalized narrative around trafficking articulated by the U.S. government and many NGOs. As noted by Segrave et al. (2009), women labeled victims of sex trafficking often do not conform to the “ideal type” of victim promoted in documents such as the U.S. State Department’s annual Trafficking in Persons Report. In contrast to the stereotyped portrayal of women locked in brothels and controlled by violent pimps, many of the women I interviewed had formed close ties with the individuals who facilitated their cross-border transport and employment (i.e., their “traffickers”). For example, interviews in Chiang Rai among the Akha<sup>5</sup> sex worker community revealed that female sex workers often trusted their *mama sans*.

“Do you have problems with your boss?” I asked one sex worker, who I call “Mo Mo.” She responded, “I have no problem with my boss. We are like sisters. When I have work, I will do my work. If I have free time I go home. If I have a problem, then the boss helps me. [We are] like a family,” she explained.

Mo Mo’s depiction of her close relationship with her *mama san* illustrates the discrepancy between assumptions that are often made about trafficking victims and the nuanced subjectivities of sex workers’ reported experiences. Antitrafficking policy regards all brothel owners and *mama sans* as

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<sup>5</sup> An ethnic minority group living in Burma and Northern Thailand.

traffickers who enslave their victims. In reality, however, these individuals often serve as support systems in an environment that otherwise offers sex workers little protection.

Such support can also extend to the financial structures of sex workers' lives. As another respondent, "Nut," explained, given a lack of citizenship documents and access to formal banking structures, many sex workers rely on their *mama sans* to hold their earnings:

When I finish my work the boss gives me my money. Some people want to save their money with the boss. When they need money, they get it from the boss. Some people get their money, like 500 baht, but they buy something. Where does the money go? I don't know. This is the example [of how we might waste our money]. So we give our money to the boss to save. In one month, we can have a lot of money saved.

Contrary to speculative data in the U.S. Department of State's 2011 Trafficking in Persons Report suggesting that women are forced to repay large debts to their traffickers (U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2011), this interviewee reported that she trusted her *mama san* and was, in fact, working with her to save money. Such positive depictions of relationships between sex workers and *mama sans* suggest that the notion that trafficking in Thailand has reached a point of "crisis" that can only be remedied by abolitionist policies is a fallacy. Many sex workers do not experience themselves to be victims, but work with their bosses to develop strategies for economic advancement in the face of state systems that place them at a structural disadvantage.<sup>6</sup>

With *Land of Smiles*, I sought to trouble the construction of the voiceless third-world victim (Doezema, 2000, 2010) through creating the character Lipoh. Lipoh, a young sex worker who found agency in her vocation, would be a character with whom I hoped audiences would sympathize. In the Chiang Mai production, Lipoh was played by actress Jenny Kwan (see Figure 1).

Responding to the character Lipoh, participants from the Kachin migrant focus groups engaged in a nuanced discussion of the victim narrative. Interestingly, however, their responses to the victim label did not focus on the binary categorizations of agency and oppression that are commonly associated with the sex work debate.<sup>7</sup> When asked about whether they felt victimhood was an important topic of exploration, rather than grapple with abstractions, the migrants instead drew from their personal experiences of what it means to be a victim or an agent.

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<sup>6</sup> Although actual sex trafficking does take place in Thailand and elsewhere, quantifying this problem remains difficult, in part due to the sensationalist narrative that conflates consensual prostitution with trafficking. An important scholarly debate about the problem of "hard numbers" can be seen in the work of Parreñas (2011), Agustin (2007), and Kempadoo et al. (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Notably, none of the migrants who attended the performance reported having personally worked in the sex industry. It can be hypothesized, however, that some of the attendees may have worked as sex workers, either currently or in the past, but were not willing to admit this as sex work is stigmatized in many ethnic communities.



"[The show] is very good," remarked female migrant, "Noh Meh," "because in it, we are not a victim." Here, Noh Meh seemed to conflate the dramatic material with her own experience of nonvictimhood, implying that by making agentive choices, the Kachin characters in the production (and in particular, the character Lipoh) reflected her own feelings.

"I really like Lipoh's decision," added another migrant, "Haung Ma." "Emma and Achara, they said to Lipoh, 'You're fine here [in the International Detention Center]. Even though back in your home is the war, the situation is that you're fine. You can be happy here.' But Lipoh said, 'No, I need to go back, I need to work.' At the end Lipoh is released, and she can go back." Here, Haung Ma agreed with Lipoh's choice to stand up to the NGO employees, who had been telling her she is "fine" living in the International Detention Center. The participant approved of Lipoh's decision to insist that she be let go—a decision that Lipoh, Emma, and the audience knew would result in her returning to sex work.

Noh Meh and Haung Ma agreed with Lipoh's refusal to perform victimhood when asked to do so by the NGO. They appreciated that Lipoh did not accept the NGO's label, and they identified with Lipoh's experience. Such a perspective on victimhood challenges the normative discourse, which paints sex workers as "wounded" or, if consenting to prostitution, as "criminal" (Doezema, 2001, 2010). The migrants who attended the production accepted neither trope. Instead, they appreciated that Lipoh refused the definition placed on her by an outsider.

Another male migrant, "Benny," explained that through watching the musical, his impressions of sex workers' victimization had changed:

I began to understand the feelings of women from seeing this musical. In the past I used to treat others, like sex workers, as like—I didn't want to talk with them because other people will view me as, you know, as *something*. But from seeing this musical, I'm aware that we need to educate each other. I understand the situation of [Lipoh], from seeing this musical. Because the family situation is difficult. We need a lot of money, and the family needs money.

Because of this, Benny explained, he now understands why women would choose to enter sex work.



**Figure 1. "Home to You." Actress Jenny Kwan as Lipoh.**

The character Lipoh also presented NGO audience members with an opportunity to dismantle their assumptions about the victimhood of female migrants. One employee, "Anna," recognized the structural processes that fueled Lipoh's migration into Thailand, processes that expose labor exploitation as being situated in the context of migration. In locating the "pull factors" that influence migration, Anna questioned normative assumptions about victimhood that are often made by NGOs:

I think a lot of people who don't work in trafficking, or myself before I read anything about trafficking, just. . . . You always have this idea like [it's] this poor victim who's been kidnapped and ends up in this ring. . . . But quite often, I mean, people can sometimes get into something by choice. And they stay in that system because of the choice they made. And I think that the play tries to bring in the "pull factors" that are involved in the situation.

Anna expressed sympathy for Lipoh's situation in a way that refuted, rather than reinforced, the normative trope of victimization that typically characterizes antitrafficking discourse. She engaged self-reflectively with the dramatic material, realizing that the portrayals of sex workers' victimhood typically espoused by her industry are unproductive.

In this way, dramatization exposed the problem of flattening women's experiences that often accompanies antitrafficking advocacy work. By stepping away from the static social world and temporarily visiting the liminal space of the theatrical world, NGO employees could disengage from the typical narratives often adopted by others in their field. The theatrical event created an opportunity for them to explore these issues more deeply.

### ***Troubling the Savior Narrative***

In addition to troubling the victim narrative, in writing *Land of Smiles* I sought to express a counterperspective to the savior narrative that commonly characterizes antitrafficking discourse. My strategy for achieving this was to problematize antitrafficking advocates themselves. In creating the character Emma, I sought to unearth this counterperspective through the voice of a would-be savior of trafficking victims who, through the course of the musical, wakes up to the fact that her attempts at advocacy are actually doing more harm than good.

**Emma's transformation.** The character Emma represents a composite of a number of American antitrafficking advocates who I observed during my initial fieldwork. Born and raised in a middle-class, midwestern, White, Protestant environment, Emma has never ventured outside her cultural milieu to gain a first-hand understanding of life in the developing world. Instead, her limited knowledge of human trafficking has been acquired through the frame of a Western NGO taking part in "rescue" operations in Thailand.

As the story unfolds, Emma gradually discovers the reality of Lipoh's former life in Burma, and the circumstances that fueled her migration and decision to work in the sex industry. She then begins to question her own role as a Western NGO worker and, in so doing, undergoes a transformation from unconscious savior to ruptured participant (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Emma's journey into consciousness represents a breaking down of static otherness and the liminality that comes with questioning one's certainty.

Creating the character Emma was, in part, an exercise in interrogating my own location in the research process. Indeed, my personal experience conducting field research in Thailand with female migrants from the Kachin Women's Association of Thailand informed my discovery of this character. My own rupture and discovery of a deeper and more complex reality of trafficking appear on the stage in Emma's journey from unconscious savior to conscious activist. By interrogating my experience as a White American woman from a middle-class background, I was able to create a more fully realized dramatic character.

In addition, Emma's dramatic journey onstage allowed members of the production team to undergo journeys of their own. As the postproduction focus groups revealed, through witnessing Emma's transformation, some of the artists themselves experienced a change in perspective. For example, actress Amanda Kruger, who played the character Emma (see Figure 2), reflected on her own transformed view of the subject matter. Kruger recalled her initial response to Emma's decision at the end of the play to let Lipoh return to her job as a sex worker:

I read the script and when I got to the end I was like "Wait, she lets her go?" I was really confused and conflicted and like, "That's weird." I don't know if I identified if there was a bad guy or a good guy, just that that's odd that [Emma's] not trying to get this little girl out of the life she's in—she's just letting her go.

Here, Kruger explained that in first reading the script, she was confused by the plot twist at the end of the story, in which Emma frees Lipoh from the Immigration Detention Center where she has been held throughout the play. Kruger reflected that in reading the script, she did not understand why Emma made this choice, as her own assumptions about trafficking and underage sex work were still coloring her view of the story. Kruger later elaborated that it was not until she began digging into the rehearsal process in Thailand and engaging with the migrant women from Burma that she truly understood Emma's reason for setting Lipoh free. Ultimately, she noted, her perspective on these issues "broadened." Kruger's response reveals the power of participation in the DAR method. By inhabiting the "world" of the play, she went beyond simply playing a role to more authentically understanding the choices of the character she portrayed.



**Figure 2. Amanda Kruger as Emma.**

**Artist-researcher positionality.** The character Emma was informed, in part, by my own personal transformation during the initial research phase. In embarking on writing *Land of Smiles*, I came to realize that my experience working in Chiang Mai could be useful in creating the character and dramatizing her journey. This process can be observed in field notes taken after attending a church celebration in 2011 with members of the Kachin community. Following the celebration, I conducted an interview with a migrant from the community. During the interview, I began to feel deeply emotionally invested in her struggle:

Everything was going fine until she started telling me about her neighbor getting beaten to death with a brick by the Burmese military. I think that was when I started to hit the

emotional wall. I decided not to go out with [friends who work at a local NGO] for Christmas, immediately after getting home from a ten-hour day with the Kachin, because I just wasn't ready to leave the place of emotional pain. As hard as it is to sit inside it, I believe that it's necessary to go through it. You do feel so utterly helpless. And in this case, I feel helpless not only against the enormity of the cultural and political realities so many women are facing but also—and now in a much more finely tuned way—up against policy and the backwardness of those who set it. (Kamler field notes, December 25, 2011)

This passage illuminates the connection between my personal experience as an artist-researcher and the journey of the character Emma. In discovering the reality of Lipoh's past, Emma undergoes what Watkins and Shulman (2008) described as a "rupture," a trauma one experiences when one's consciousness shifts from passive "bystander" to active "witness." Ruptures are often accompanied by a feeling of isolation as one realizes that although they have changed, the world around them has stayed the same.

By drawing on my own feelings of helplessness, I found inroads into the creative process that ultimately informed and deepened the musical's story. The rupture experienced by Emma in the play reflected my own experience during the initial fieldwork.

Taking this connection a step further, in the performance context, as Emma experiences a rupture, the audience, too, is brought into a ruptured state. This process reveals how in the DAR method, simultaneous visibilities are at play: the "subjugated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988) of the third-world subjects; the actual discourse on trafficking, and the production of that discourse; the rupture of the Western protagonist (representing a death of the notion of the enlightened, Western individual); and—importantly—the production process itself. That is, the researcher-artists' own process of discovery is made visible throughout the musical, inviting the audience to experience her discovery in real time.

Emma's journey introduced an alternative to the normative savior narrative that characterizes antitrafficking discourse, and prompted self-awareness on the part of audience participants, as well as myself as researcher-artist. Here, we see how the tools of narrative construction and performance allow participants to open up to the performances they enact in life through engaging with performances enacted onstage.

### ***Troubling the Moralizing Narrative***

One of the most striking narratives that emerged in my preliminary interviews with NGO employees was what I call the "moralizing" narrative. This narrative focused on a belief that "they" (Thailand) do not uphold the same value systems and moral codes as "we" (the West) do. This was demonstrated most prominently by a Western female NGO employee, "Mary Kate," whose work was faith-based. She described what she felt were inherent differences between the West and the ethnic minority communities of the girls her organization sought to rescue. These differences, she suggested, were not just behavioral, but deeply embedded in two contrasting value systems.

In my preliminary interviews, I had asked Mary Kate whether she believed there were inherent cultural differences between the ethnic minority communities her organization served and the West. The employee responded by discussing the story of a young woman who had arrived at the organization as a “victim of sex trafficking and forced labor.” Explaining that the young woman, who was HIV positive, had lived in the NGO shelter from age 9 to 14, Mary Kate described her as having endured a “horrendous case” of sex trafficking and abuse:

We cared for her for five years. We have a one-on-one counselor who spent literally hours with this child, counseling her and talking to her about dignity and self-worth. . . . And she decided in the end, last summer. . . . We let her go back to her village area—she has a father who’s disabled—and for the first time [we] allowed her to go back for a week by herself. And she chose to leave us. She is now living with some Thai guy, and selling [drugs] on the street.

Mary Kate seemed baffled as to why the young woman would choose to leave the shelter, given that her home environment was inherently damaging—a place in which her quality of life was degraded. By equating conditions of poor health and selling drugs with reuniting with men from her home culture, this employee imposed a moral judgment on the value of life in such ethnic communities. She suggested that life at the NGO, in which Western social workers and counselors “invested” their time into trying to reform the young woman’s attitudes about her home culture, was a morally superior environment. Mary Kate’s response was a stark illustration of the moralizing narrative.

I sought to trouble the moralizing narrative through creating the character Lewelyn Brand. As the CEO of Lighthouse, a faith-based NGO dedicated to rescuing sex workers, Lewelyn represents the morality of the Christian West. Lewelyn is strong in her dedication to the antitrafficking policy of “raid and rescue,” and holds firmly to her belief that reforming “victims” through Christian teachings will steer them away from sex work and onto a moral path. Played by actress Ann Fink in the Chiang Mai production, Lewelyn demonstrates her beliefs by singing “No Woman Fights to Be a Prostitute” (see Figure 3).

In the focus groups, the moralizing narrative became a contested site of debate among NGO employees (like Mary Kate) who attended the performance. In discussing the issue of sex work, for example, one employee, “Edward,” expressed his belief in the moral authority of the West: “It’s about the demand,” he asserted. “You’ve got to tell Thai people that [sex work isn’t] right. I mean, if there was no demand we wouldn’t need sex workers!” he said, emphatically.

A female employee, “Donna,” then countered this line of thought, remarking,

But when in history has it ever been like that? I mean, prostitution is the oldest form of like. . . . In the entire world. It’s not a Thai issue. It’s a worldwide issue. But you saying this is wrong is, again, taking away empowerment of people who may choose to be in that profession. It’s still looking at it from a one-sided black or white, right or wrong.



**Figure 3. "No Woman Fights to Be a Prostitute."  
Ann Fink (left) as Lewelyn Brand, and Marisa Mour (right) as Achara Montri.**

Another female employee, "Fran," then asserted, "This is an endless debate really because, you know... there's multiple feminist viewpoints on this."

Edward then reiterated his thoughts about demand, noting, "The demand, from what I can gather, the foreign demand for sex is about twenty percent, and then eighty percent is Thai people."

When Fran questioned Edward's use of statistics to inform his argument, Edward replied, "Well this is just my way of looking at it."

Another male respondent, "Luis," then countered Edward's argument, noting, "I don't know how we can have percentages about anything. I mean, we don't even know the population of Chiang Mai."

In this heated exchange among NGO focus group participants, Edward reiterated a common abolitionist trope. If demand were reduced, he reasoned, prostitution could be eradicated. Embedded in his statement was a moral critique of Thai people and a perception that the West must teach them proper moral values and behaviors. This trope cements Orientalist ideas about differences between West and East, rendering the East as "childlike" and needing education and reform (see Said, 1979).

What was interesting about this exchange, however, was the degree to which Edward's narrative was instantly challenged, not just by one, but by three other members of the group. Had they been interviewed one-on-one, these employees may have reiterated the simplified narrative expressed by Edward. In the context of the group discussion, however, they instead challenged him.

I suggest that the space created by the theatrical performance medium allowed for this nuanced discourse to take place. The postperformance focus group discussions, composed of participants of a similar demographic as those who participated in the original interviews, revealed challenges to the moralizing narrative. The theatrical event primed participants to engage in a discussion that they may not otherwise have felt authorized to undertake. In so doing, alternative perspectives about the moralizing narrative came to the fore.

### ***Narrative of Discovery***

*Land of Smiles* allowed for a fourth narrative to emerge, which I call the narrative of discovery. This narrative illustrates a change in perception taking place among participants about the issues presented in the show. This narrative was articulated most profoundly by the artists. Interestingly, the Los Angeles-based artists experienced this change in perception through their relationships with the characters they portrayed, while the Chiang Mai-based artists experienced a change in relation to real people in their communities.

One female Los Angeles-based artist, Melody Butiu, described her process of discovering the play's "world" through the characters she portrayed:

I like the themes of the play being gray and life is not black and white. I mean, you can see the different perspectives of Achara's character wanting to stop people one at a time [from migrating] and follow the rule of law and having some sort of guideline in order to achieve the goal of ending trafficking. And then, you know, the missionaries' perspective as well. It's not just simple bad guy and good guy. And then certainly the complexities of Lipoh's choices and what they have to do to fight for their people and for their survival.

"Did you know about that before you came into the play?" The moderator asked. Butiu responded,

I mean, I knew about it from doing the show [in Los Angeles]. But it didn't really hit me as much until I started approaching this character [of Soon Nu]. I didn't play Soon Nu [in Los Angeles], so working the "Kachin Women Are Proud and Strong" number, just going through beat by beat—it's such an epic song of the life that they had before, and what their life is like now in war-torn Burma, and the choices they have to make and the sacrifices they have to make. Even though I kind of knew it intellectually, it didn't hit me emotionally until working on it this time around.



Here, Butiu described the process of discovering Thailand's antitrafficking landscape, as well as the realities faced by migrants from war-torn Burma, through her work with two characters in the play who grapple with these issues. She explained that although she intellectually understood the hardships migrants faced, it was not until she traveled to Thailand and played the Soon Nu character (see Figure 4) that the play's themes hit home. This actor approached her discovery through the lens of character: By understanding the difficulties her character faced, her views of the issues raised in the play transformed.



**Figure 4. "Kachin Women Are Proud and Strong." Melody Butiu as Soon Nu.**

Interestingly, the Chiang Mai-based artists' responses revealed a different aspect of the narrative of discovery. Although they, too, recognized that the play changed their views of Thailand, sex work, and trafficking, their discoveries involved navigating pre-existing relationships with members of the local Chiang Mai community. One artist, Marisa Mour, explained,

I have Christian missionary friends, so I sort of knew their complexities and conflicting values [going into the play] and basically they want to do good. And so I can kind of deal with all the tensions that they are carrying within them. But I also know people who are Thai feminist NGO workers and they have the values that Achara does. And so while I was trying to embody this role, it actually made me more compassionate for what people who are Thai feminist NGO workers might be doing.

Another artist, Christy Humphry, described a similar process of discovery through participating in the play while reflecting on the values of her community:

I have to admit before I moved to Thailand the whole trafficking thing, I mean I knew nothing about sex workers before I came here. And trafficking I only knew from movies. So I mean, I was pretty naïve in a lot of ways. I mean, just seeing this play and being a part of this. . . . Every time I listen to the words I'm like, "Oh, I'm getting it." I mean, I'm a Christian, but I'm not a missionary. But I have a lot of friends who are, and I kind of understand why they are out to save souls. But I look at it differently after seeing this play. I realize that it's not necessarily something we need to be doing.

Finally, a third Chiang Mai-based artist, Ann Fink, expressed a similar narrative of discovery:

Living here in Chiang Mai is a unique experience. Because I know NGO workers, I know missionaries, I've been an NGO worker, I know the people in the audience. They have lived a lot of what they are seeing. And they know the situation, or some know it's there and choose not to find out about it. So I think this play is very unique for folks in the audience.

Here, Fink expressed a narrative of discovery for members of an audience that, she believed, already knew about the issues raised in the play. Through watching the play, she felt, these community members began seeing the issues in a new way.

## Discussion

### *Theater and Performativity*

*Land of Smiles*, as a DAR project, illustrates the ways in which identity and performance intersect. In her discussion of identity as a social construction in the context of race in performance, Dorinne Kondo (1997) explained the way in which identities in the social world are "performed"—a process whereby enacting one's identity in effect constitutes that identity. Citing Judith Butler's theory of "subject formation" (as cited in Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2010), Kondo explained that without the performance, there is, in fact, no identity (p. 7). The performance context of *Land of Smiles* allowed for a space to open in which the identities of NGO employees, female migrants, and artists could be performed, and their visibility interrogated. Such an opening reflects the power of the theatrical medium as a space in which transformations and ruptures can take place.

*Land of Smiles* also exemplifies the way in which theatrical performance can help a community overcome collective trauma. Collective trauma is the notion that all members of a community are equally caught in a social catastrophe (see Caruth, 1996; Hesford, 2011; Martin-Baro, 1994; Santner, 2001; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Through engaging with the dramatic material onstage, participants were able to interrogate the collective trauma that characterizes the antitrafficking movement, thereby moving from passive "bystanders" to active "witnesses."

Finally, *Land of Smiles* illuminates the way in which performance and feminist international research intersect. Feminist international research is attuned to process and location, the critical interrogation of power, and the researcher's own self-conscious location in the research context. It is

reflexive, requiring the researcher's constant willingness to reapproach the research inquiry from a new position. Because of this, feminist research is particularly dependent on mindful attention to process, and the willingness of the researcher to grapple with whatever new issues, questions, and struggles arise as that process shifts. In line with Haraway's conception of an epistemological framework that privileges perspectives that are "particular" and idiosyncratic, and through which unrecognized social realities can be brought to the fore (1988, p. 4), feminist international research also relies on the interrogation of relationships of power within the process of research itself, and attention to the positionality of all involved.

I suggest that *Land of Smiles* made these theoretical feminist concepts concrete, by involving the participation of multiple subjects, and inviting contradictory and "situated" perspectives to come to the fore throughout the research and production processes. This project illustrates the far-reaching potential of DAR as a feminist praxis.

### Conclusion

Art has the power to transcend contradictory logics. As a higher octave of communication, art can create a universe that allows for disparities in understanding to dissolve and for a new method of connection to emerge. Through this study, I have attempted to illustrate theater's unique potential to serve as a site of resistance against the dominant narrative employed by members of the Western anti-trafficking movement: a narrative that perpetuates tropes of victimhood, and a rescue ideology more beneficial to Western advocates than to the female trafficking survivors they are trying to save. I have also explicated a theory and method of Dramatization as Research (DAR), a feminist praxis that unites aspects of participatory action and practice-based research, but goes beyond these methodologies in its incorporation of the subjectivity of the researcher.

The goal of *Land of Smiles* was to discover the contours of this new method: the ways in which international human rights research and dramatization intersect, overlap, and inform each other, both as creative processes and as modes of discovery. I found that through participating in the dramatic storytelling process, NGO employees, migrants, and artists began to view their own experiences through a multiplicity of lenses. Rather than retreat into normative tropes that characterize the discourse on human trafficking, participants expressed a range of perspectives and emotions that disrupted this discourse. Their responses demonstrate the power of theater as a tool for intervention in human rights witnessing, and a space for personal and social transformation.

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